

Human Rights and World Peace - the Buddhist Way

That humans desire happiness and comfort [*sukhakāma*] is a basic fact of life which is recognized in Buddhism. From this it follows that humans, nay all living things, are averse to pain and discomfort [*dukkhapaṭikkulā*]. So our delightful **Manual of Buddhism** called the **Dhammapada** expresses this idea in this manner - " All dread at being beaten with clubs and rods. All fear at the thought of death. Taking oneself as the example, kill not. Nor cause another to kill."

*Sabbe tasanti daṇḍassa sabbe bhāyanti maccuno
attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā na haneyya na ghātaye.*

Dhp. v. 129

People love their lives, i.e. they love to continue living [*jīvitukāma*]. They do not like to die [*amaritukāma*]. It is the first basic right as far as humans are concerned. It is also the first **Fundamental Human Right** as listed by the **United Nations**. It is **the right of everyone to live without any threat whatsoever to one's life**. Buddhism goes even further than this. The Buddhists extend this **right to live happily** to all living things, voicing it as "May all beings be well and happy " [*Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā*. Metta Sutta. Sn. v. 145]

In propounding its ethical injunctions, Buddhism adopts the very sound **principle of self-example** [*attūpanāyika - dhammapariyāya*]. Do not do unto others what you would not like others do unto you. This is how the Nālaka Sutta of the Suttanipāta [Sn. v. 705] puts it - " As I am, so are they. As they are, so am I. Taking oneself as the example, let not one kill, nor get others to kill."

It should be adequately known and appreciated by everyone that **Buddhism does not believe in a Creator of the world as an unknown and only-believed-in power**, outside our realm of existence. Nor do the Buddhists accept the position of **any section of the human community in the world as being chosen people with the grace of God on their side**. They believe that **all living things in the world are a universal brotherhood** and that **all have an equal right to live**. That is the law

that governs the harmonious continuance of the ecosystems of the world. This is not to be interrupted or tampered with. If we do, we do so at great risk to our own survival on this planet.

This is how the scientists of the world view it. A serious note of this is absolutely necessary.

'Edward Wilson defines biophilia as " the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes," noting that " to the degree that we come to understand other organisms, we will place greater value on them, and on ourselves." Yet until the biophilia hypothesis is more fully absorbed in the science and culture of our times -- and becomes a tenet animating our everyday lives -- the human prospect will wane as the rich biological exuberance of this water planet is quashed, impoverished, cut, polluted, and pillaged.' [The Biophilia Hypothesis - Edited by Stephen R. Kellart and Edward O. Wilson. 1993. p. 4 f.].

From what we have said above, it should now be clear that the stimulus to propagate **a principle of right to live** must necessarily come from an ingrained respect for life of all grades. **Life cannot be created by any one to live and maintain itself, feeding on other forms of life produced by the same creator.** The Buddhists refuse to see even a molecule of wisdom or justice in such an assumption. It does not seem to be good enough even as an item of old world Stone Age beliefs. In terms of Buddhist thinking, this selected freedom to choose between humans and animals would be both arbitrary and unjustifiable. It is no more than a child-like claim. This invariably leads to the possibility of discriminating within human groups as well, putting forward diverse claims all the time for superiority of one group over another.

In what might be called a proto-legal form, Buddhism endeavours to **propagate this idea of respect for life**, life at all levels, through the very first injunction of its moral code or *sīla*. Buddhism's basic moral code consists of five precepts [*pañcasīla*] of healthy and wholesome interpersonal relationships. The first of these refers to abstention from destruction of life [*pāṇātipātā veramaṇī*],

both human and animal. This injunction has three specific areas of applicability: 1. One shall not destroy the life of any living being. 2. One shall not get another to do it. 3. Nor shall one endorse another doing it.

All five injunctions of the *pañcasīla*, in their regulatory nature, are societal in character. Buddhism maintains that in the breach of every one of them, humans turn hostile towards society. Such a situation generates enmity or *vera* towards society. Hence the concept of fivefold enmity or *pañca-verāni*. It is also said that in their breach, they generate fear or dread in society. Hence the concept of *pañca-bhayāni* or fivefold dread. The Buddhist verdict on such a miscreant who is guilty of the above is that he **is a villain who is lacking in moral goodness** [*appahāya pañcaverāni dussīlo iti vuccati*]. And he is judged as deserving to go to a place of damnation after death [*Kāyassa bheda duppañño nirayaṃ so upapajjati*].

Thus we see from the above that Buddhism lays a very firm foundation for upholding the first **Fundamental Human Right** of respect for life [the right of every man, woman and child **to live without any threat to his or her life.**]. Buddhism denounces all discrimination on grounds of religious leanings, ethnicity or political ideologies. The legendary ideal of the Universal Monarch or **Cakkavatti** in Buddhism dismisses all political supremacies, reducing them almost to zero, in the face of moral goodness. The Cakkavatti insists that there shall be total moral goodness in the land, i.e. the observance of the *pañcasīla* consisting of respect for life, respect for legitimately acquired property, respect for propriety of relations between the sexes etc.

The next **Fundamental Human Right** is the right of a person to own his legitimate possessions without fear of being dispossessed. More than twenty-five centuries ago, the Buddha had very wisely placed this item as the second in his list of moral precepts under *pañcasīla*. It is the Buddhist precept of *adinnādānā veramaṇī* or abstinence from theft of others' possessions. This precept is to be undertaken with **the awareness that possessions are the primary source of one's**

pleasures and comforts. Therefore respecting the principle of self-example or *attūpanāyika* to which we have already referred, one would not dispossess others of their legitimately owned property, i.e. one would not rob others of their source of pleasure and comfort.

In the more civilized countries of the world, people not only refrain from robbing others of their property, but help them to safeguard theirs. They set up regional organizations and establish security measures for citizens' property through what they call **neighbourhood watch areas**. Each one in the area, men, women and children, both young and old, is responsible to report intruders and to reduce acts of theft in the area to a minimum. We would consider this a delightful expression in the direction of abstinence from theft [*adinnādānā veramaṇī*] - a highly commendable social gesture - in a totally Buddhist spirit.

The United Nations' concern for these at international level attempts to safeguard smaller countries against invasion into their territories by their aggressive and ambitious neighbours. It is the violation on a larger scale of this principle of neighbourly love that leads to wars at global level. If only humans would dismiss and rid themselves of their own inherited bloated opinions about being chosen people, supreme communities among humans, and being intellectual and cultural elite, the world would be a happier place for a larger and more genuine brotherhood of mankind.

The Visākhians, growing up in the tradition of the Great Buddhist Lady Visākhā of the Buddha's day, whom the Buddha joyfully included in his fourfold assembly of Bhikkhu, Bhikkhuni, Upāsaka and Upāsikā, should at no stage in their life, early or late, lose sight of the fact that their growth and that of their families should be within a specific perimeter of Buddhist values. If this is lost, the whole worth of being Visākhian is irreparably lost.

May Visākhians, wherever they be, be a beaming light to the world. May the blessings of the Tisaraṇa be always with them and guide their way.

May there be peace on earth and goodwill among men.